

Barthes and the Fountain Pen: An Intimate Obsession

'The pen is the tongue of the mind'
– Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

Roland Barthes' untimely death at age 64 marked the loss of an intellectual, philosophical and literary icon whose writings continue to have a significant international influence on the fields of philosophy, literary criticism, architecture, design, photography and fashion.

A complex, enigmatic and intensely private figure, Barthes revelled in the idea of language and, above all else, was a writer who loved to write: his extensive *oeuvre* ranging from journalistic pieces on such diverse subjects as toys, wrestling, fashion, the French novel, wine, film, cinema and French culture – to complex critiques of the meaning of 'signs', the nature of 'authorship' and the interpretation of text.

Renowned as a gentle "indoors man", Barthes was fond of painting, drawing (which he considered himself as an amateur) and playing piano which he had learned as a child.

Pictured with cigar in hand, Roland Barthes was the epitome of the sophisticated, urbane, and demure Paris intellectual that he had become famous for. Indeed, in many ways, Barthes took on at least some of the characteristics of the Dandy that he wrote so eloquently about in his literary essay *Dandyism and Fashion* for Franco-American cultural magazine *United States Lines Paris Review*. "The distinguished man...", writes Barthes, "...is a man who marks himself off from the crowd using modest means, but it is a means whose power...is immense."

Barthes' passion and sense of aesthetic style no doubt also extended to the objects that he most loved to write with: his collection of fountain pens that used in writing the first drafts of many of his most famous works.

In one of his curious and rather more flamboyant interviews published in *Le Monde* in 1973, entitled – *An Almost Obsessive Relation to Writing Instruments* – as translated by Linda Coverdale and published posthumously by University of California Press in *The Grain of The Voice*, Roland Barthes speaks of his love of writing with fountain pens and the pleasure they bring to his writing that is so implicit in his work.

Smitten with the feel and pleasure of writing with a fountain pen, Barthes reflects in the interview conducted by Jean-Louis de Rambures, "In the end, I always return to fine fountain pens. The essential thing is that they can produce that soft, smooth writing I absolutely require." Indeed, Barthes goes on to confess that he felt "no affinity" with the ubiquitous ballpoint pen, unflatteringly associating it with the notion of a "Bic style" or a style of writing implying that the writer had 'dashed off' the copy rather than taken the time to approach the work in a more studied way that he believed the writers' use of a fountain pen would imply. As Barthes remarks to de Rambures, "... I would say, a bit nastily, that there is a "Bic style" which is really just for churning out copy, writing that merely transcribes thought."

Writing with fountain pens also appears to have given Barthes a sense of connectedness with the page that other forms of writing instruments simply weren't able to achieve. Like many exemplary writers, Barthes was drawn to the notion that writing by hand with a fountain pen brings with it many unique qualities of style and control that can't be replicated through more impersonal, less intimate technological means. His penchant for collecting pens also became an obsessional quest, regaling himself and confessing to his interviewer the fact that he had "...far too many pens..." and that "... as soon as I see a new one, I start craving it..."

For Barthes, writing with fountain pens also accords with his philosophy of writing as a tactile art form. As a sensualist, the tactile nature of the fountain pen also suited Barthes' whole idea of what he felt writing was about: an act of creating text through the physical act of writing by hand and its intimate connection with the page.

While Roland Barthes wrote of the 'bodily connection' of writing by hand, the pleasures of creating text with fountain pens is one that continues to be prevalent amongst a number of contemporary writers. Daniel Chandler of the University of Wales in his study of 'the phenomenology of writing by hand' refers to a number of contemporary writers who place great importance on writing by hand and the physical connection with the page. Chandler cites prolific American novelist John Barth as one who particularly favours the use of the fountain pen and "the muscular movement of putting down script on paper..." (Barth in an interview with Blair Mahoney for literary website *The Modern Word* speaks of "...draw[ing] out my sentences in longhand with an immortal British Parker 51..."). Chandler also cites William Gass, Fay Weldon and Tom Robbins – amongst many other writers – as examples of contemporary writers who are deeply attached to the act of writing by hand.

In a recent interview that I recorded with Pulitzer Prize winning American writer Robert Olen Butler, Butler similarly speaks of a passion for writing by hand with fountain pens and the connection that he finds so attractive in the creative process. Butler suggests that writing by hand with a fountain pen helps to create a connection with the "plasticity of the language" and invokes "the nature of writing as a plastic art as well as verbal one."

According to distinguished Roland Barthes scholar, Class of 1916 Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Cornell University, Jonathan Culler – who met Roland Barthes at Oxford in 1969 – agrees that Barthes' connection with the fountain pen fits well with Barthes' "artisan" ideas about writing and its relationship with the body as a physical act rather than purely an intellectual one alone.

As Culler observes, "Barthes invokes the connection with the body where other people would have been inclined to speak of the mind...", and accordingly, "...writing is seen by him as a bodily activity... something that his hand accomplishes more than something his mind accomplishes..."

Barthes was also very ritualistic in his writing habits and was given to carefully ordering the environment in which he sat down to work as a writer. His use of fountain pens appears to have played an important part in his elaborate system of working as a writer. Accordingly, Culler describes Barthes as “a person of ordered habit” who was “meticulous about daily objects”, going even so far as to order his summer house outside Bayonne in exactly the same way as his Paris apartment so that he would replicate his exact writing environment in each.

Roland Barthes’ presence as writer continues today with the same power and luminosity that his insights have brought to many aspects of culture, language, art and society. Barthes’ famous statement in *Writing Degree Zero* that – “Literature is like phosphorus: it shines with its maximum brilliance at the moment when it attempts to die” – seems curiously to have become a metaphor his own impact as an intellectual force: his brilliance continuing to glow long after his mortal extinction had occurred in bodily form.

For all of Barthes’ quirky, enigmatic and obsessional rituals in his practice as a writer, there is no doubt that his obsession with writing by hand with a fountain pen will be shared by many other writers who continue to enjoy the intimate, appealing and direct connection that the use of a fine writing instruments can create between the writer and the page.

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